Sections
Focus
Columns and Reviews
Consulting
Training
News & Announcements

Archives
Browse past issues of Praxis

About Us
About Us

Submissions
Submit an article to Praxis

Home » Archives » Spring 2008 (Volume 5 Issue 2) - Authority and Cooperation

A Century to Authority in the Writing Studio

Spring 2008 / Training

*by **Cindy Cochran**, Illinois College*

Examining strategies from the past in the present

Every year, even as I strive to become more authoritative as a scholar and find my voice as an author, I also aim to lose some authority in the writing center. Now, gladly, I'm losing authority in the classroom. This loss is due to writing center pedagogy, which at **Illinois College** has helped me reinvent our approach to tutor training and to serving students, including developing writers.

Cindy Cochran

Our college requires all students to complete first-year writing or its equivalent: either a traditional research-paper writing course, a writing-intensive first-year seminar, or advanced placement credit. Until very recently we did not offer any English classes with course numbers lower than that of first-year writing, and we do not offer courses tagged as remedial. Nonetheless, a confluence of factors compelled me to try something new. First, a faculty survey regarding writing goals demonstrated that our faculty prizes revision and clarity but also demands adherence to grammar rules as well. Many of the faculty, especially those working with students aspiring to become teachers or go to graduate school, had been urging the English Department to offer some kind of "grammar class" (Hodgson, Cochran, and Welch). Second, as with most colleges our size, a portion of our first-year student body comes under-prepared to handle college-level writing and has problems at the sentence level of their writing. Third, I needed a better way to teach my student-employees how to be good peer consultants in our **Writing Center** because once-a-week

meetings and special training sessions had not allowed adequate time for in-depth guidance, training, or supervision.

I began to think I needed to offer some kind of grammar class, but I was skeptical. After all, historical models of writing clinics and labs have long been abandoned. These labs, used to prepare students considered under-prepared for college-level writing, tended to focus on grammar through drill and practice models (Carino 18). It is safe to say that drill and practice is out of favor in the rhetoric and composition community since Hillocks' meta-analysis appeared in 1986. His work convinced me early in my career that teaching grammar skills alone would not advance students' abilities in writing and that too much attention to grammar would take away precious time from the writing classroom (cf. Williams). Yet, like other practitioners, I have seen people who seem to profit from some attention to prescriptive rules of Standard Academic English (SAE) as long as they are learning in the context of writing. Certainly in the writing center, clients ask consultants to help them avoid making errors such as sentence fragments or comma splices even in no-pen centers. In my own situation, I was beginning to hear requests for more grammar knowledge from my own staff.

I needed to do something, so I devised a paired set of courses: one for under-prepared writers and one for skilled writers. The upper-level course, I figured, could double as training for apprentice consultants in my college's writing center, which I direct. By pairing the two courses in a single studio, perhaps I could reach several goals simultaneously while honoring the best pedagogy of the last one hundred years. The lower-level studio course, "Writing and Revising Studio," offers students a chance to review principles of grammar and mechanical issues in the context of a computer lab. The upper-level class, "Writing, Revising, and Consulting," requires that students do the same work as well as read and write about peer tutoring. The two classes meet together in a computer classroom/lab so students can work in partnership. Because of the students' success in the course, I have come to believe that within a dynamic, studio-styled classroom writing center pedagogy can work synergistically with writing lab practices that our discipline has considered outdated since the 1970's or, at latest, the mid-1980s.

> 1. Writing lab practice: Any pedagogy that asks students to attend to surface issues of language and mechanics is borrowing from the writing clinics of the early twentieth century. These clinics, often distinct from English classes, aimed at helping an ever-growing population of college students to catch up to the standards expected of them. The importance of English language skill as a requirement for college success had already been underscored when Harvard began to employ an essay test as part of its admission exams (Hobbs and Berlin 251). It has become almost a mantra that asking students to do this kind of work strips them of their authentic language and thereby inhibits any progress they might otherwise make in developing their own voices. But we have not yet determined that students can not profit from time spent on learning about SAE.

The experimental class that I teach, in fact, incorporates writing lab pedagogy because students use both a workbook (*Reviewing Basic Grammar*) and a writing website with exercises (*MyCompLab*). If this were the extent of the class, many literacy scholars would think it to be fundamentally archaic and pointless, and so would I. However, the class makes important use of current

classroom and writing center pedagogy to provide a lively context for their work on SAE skills.

> 2.Classroom pedagogy: Writing classes at most colleges ask students to write purposeful prose directed to various audiences in a way that allows them to explore their writing process as well as the social context of their work. Many are process-based and directed to helping students become audience-centered and goal-directed while paying attention to global concerns.

My classroom studio employs contemporary pedagogy by asking students to write three pieces over the course of the semester. The first is a self-assessment of themselves as writers, which they revise at the end of the course. The second is a professional or personal statement aimed at a scholarship committee, graduate school program, or job search committee (their choice). They plan, write, re-plan, and revise these papers over the course of several weeks, and this is the first time that many in the lower-numbered course have truly revised a paper. The third is a profile of someone else, typically another student (currently, those taking the consulting studio write their profiles of their writing partners *as* developing writers). As students write, I guide them in their writing process while they also guide one another. I also offer some feedback on their drafts. However, because students work in pairs and small groups including students in both the upper-level and the lower-level course, I leave a lot unsaid in my comments. Some of these students, however, are also consultants or apprentices in the writing center working specifically on the goal of becoming better consultants. Because of this, the studio also relies on theory and practice of writing centers and passes that praxis on to the apprentice consultants.

> 3. Writing center pedagogy: When instructors in the classroom use writing center pedagogy — including collaborative learning, peer tutoring, and individualized attention — things come alive. On occasion, when we ask writing center consultants into our classrooms, we also blur distinctions between student and professional (Soliday 1995). Just as socially constructive meaning-making that occurs in collaborative work erases distinctions between author and audience (Bruffee), the collaborative work of writing centers and classrooms may erase traditional boundaries between tutor and tutored. Finally, paying attention to individu*als* may heighten students' sense of individu*ality* as authors.

In my class, because some of the students in the upper-level course are apprentices or consultants in the writing center, they bounce between developing their own writing voices and helping others to do so. All the students in both the upper and the lower level are working on essays almost weekly, and as they always work collaboratively, they motivate one another to improve as writers. The students improve partly by applying lessons they are learning about SAE and partly by directing their attention to more global rhetorical concerns. The apparent effects of the tutors' presence on students in the lower-level course may be the single most important reason I have chosen to continue offering the studio every semester.

The benefits of the class have been marked, especially in the students' ability to make considered revisions of their written work. But what strikes me as most important is what seems to happen to them as independent agents in charge of

their own learning and even of their own authorship. For example, after a few weeks into each semester, many students report to their partners, rather than to me, that they will be absent or late. By the time they write their third paper, a number of students voluntarily peer review their papers more than the requisite number of times and actively seek others in the class to work with them, often without my prodding.

Some partnerships become strong. Indeed, in the first semester, several partners became so entrenched in working together in the classroom that I worried the studio class was promoting students' over-dependence on their studio partners. I was concerned about what they would do after the end of the semester and worried that they would never visit the writing center, thereby missing out on a different writing experience that they could use in subsequent classes. But this has not happened: by the end of first semester, most of the students reported that they visited the writing center, and the visitor's log bears them out. This pattern has continued in the two subsequent semesters.

These phenomena, as well as the general noise level of the studio, led me to realize that the peer tutors have assumed some of the authority and control in the class. That realization was exciting, but even more exciting is that students in both the lower- and the higher-level course have used the studio as a springboard to authorship and agency. Several have made attempts — some successful — to publish their work or to put their personal statements to use in other ways. In the second semester, one student used his personal statement to apply for a substantial scholarship, which he won. Two students from that semester published profiles in the student newspaper, and a third profile is reportedly in press. Another used her peer-tutoring experience to co-author a conference paper with me, and yet two others are in the process of writing a proposal for the upcoming **International Writing Centers Association** conference. Two of these seven student writers were in the lower-level course. I cannot attest that the studio itself is responsible for the students' authorship, but I believe that it had a hand.

In a way, what my studio is doing is returning to the writing labs of the early and mid-twentieth century. Like some of the earlier lab instructors who tried to work on the same "plane" as their students (Buck, qtd. in Carino 18), I have abandoned at least some of my authority. I don't teach as much as I coach, roaming the classroom and sitting with individuals or partners as they discuss a paper or struggle with a lesson on *MyCompLab*.

There are crucial differences, however, between my studios and the writing clinics and labs of yore. First, early writing labs and even early writing clinics were not staffed by peer tutors but a single instructor (Carino 18). Thus, collaboration did not occur. Second, there is no evidence that students in the clinics wrote papers in addition to their drill and practice in grammar and mechanics. Rather, lessons were seen as fundamental building blocks that students would then use when they wrote for other classes. In my studio course, lessons are applied as the need arises because of the writing that students are doing in the studio itself. Related to the absence of any actual writing in former writing labs is that the work students did would lack the exigency that is possible in contemporary writing classrooms. In my studio, the three papers are purposeful, audience-based, and knowledge-making endeavors.

Sometimes I think that we avoid using lessons from the past for fear of

regressing. However, by considering all we have learned about the writing process and the contextualization of writing, we may wish to experiment with practices associated with writing labs. In this millennium, we must configure our efforts to teach a wide range of students now entering universities, colleges, and community colleges. Students with a wide range of ACT and SAT scores expect to attend college. For many students, exposure to SAE is limited to what is in high school textbooks. Of course, some time in middle school or high school, many students have drilled and practiced in language rules, and I suspect we will see more of that as school districts rush to meet standards to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act. But how many have had anyone help them make a connection between what they learn in a workbook and what they write on their own page?

Perhaps a useful perspective is that those who employ writing center pedagogy in a lower-level writing course come full circle, returning home. As long as we keep refurnishing our home with the best of composition and rhetoric theory and pedagogy, we need not fear using lessons of the past. That is, it may be worth our time to investigate the potential of employing lab praxis such as drill-and-practice lessons, but only if our students are studying language in the service of creating purposeful, audience-centered and meaningful writing. Perhaps one successful formula for facilitating authorship is that students work in a highly motivating studio context made possible only by incorporating the best of classroom, lab, and writing center pedagogy.

That, at least, has been my experience, and it has been humbling. I may be the nominal expert in my classroom, but my students write the last word, and that's as it should be.

Works Cited

Bruffee, Kenneth A. "Writing and Reading as Collaborative or Social Acts." *Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers*. Ed. Theresa Enos. New York: Random House, 1987. 565-574.

Bruland, Holly "**'Accomplishing Intellectual Work': An Investigation of the Re-Locations Enacted Through On-Location Tutoring**" *Praxis* Spring 2007. 30 Jan 2008
< http://localhost/praxisarchive/?q=node/144 >.

Carino, Pete. "Early Writing Centers: Toward a History." *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*. Eds. Robert W. Barnett and Jacob. S. Blumner. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001, 10-22.

Hillocks, George Jr. *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*. Urbana, Illinois: National Conference on Research in English and ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1986.

Hobbs, Catherine L., and James A. Berlin. "A Century of Writing Instruction in School and College English." *A Short History of Writing Instruction from Ancient Greece to Modern America*. 2nd ed. Ed. James J. Murphy. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001, 247-289.

Hodgson, Justin, Emily Welch, and Cynthia Cochran. "Goals, Goals, and More Goals: Consensus and Consternation in Assessing Writing Goals." National Conference of Teachers of English Annual Convention (conference).

Indianapolis. 20 Nov. 2004.

MyCompLab (course website). NY: Pearson-Longman, 2007. 15 Jan. 2007 — 30 Jan. 2008 < http://www.MyCompLab.com >.

Soliday, Mary. "Shifting Roles in Classroom Tutoring: Cultivating the Art of Boundary Crossing." *The Writing Center Journal* 16 (1995): 59-73.

Williams, James. D. Introduction. *Visions and Re-visions: Continuity and Change in Rhetoric and Composition*. Ed. James D. Williams. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002, 1-12.

Yarber, Mary Laine, and Robert E. Yarber. *Reviewing Basic Grammar*. Seventh edition. NY: Pearson-Longman, 2007.

Cynthia Cochran (Ph.D., Carnegie Mellon University) has been teaching rhetoric and writing for more than 20 years. She is the writing center director at **Illinois College**, where she is also an associate professor of English.

‹ "So rudely forcedâ€¦": Student Writers, Course Requirements, and the Writing Center | **up** | **About Us ›**